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SUBJECT: TOUGHER TIMES AHEAD FOR PRO-THAKSIN FORCES IN NORTH

REF: A. BANGKOK 247 (PRESSURE ON THAI GOVERNMENT)
[1](#)B. CHIANG MAI 10 (PRO-THAKSIN VOTE DROPS)
[1](#)C. CHIANG MAI 4 (THAKSIN'S HEARTLAND MAY MOBILIZE)
[1](#)D. CHIANG MAI 3 (REDSHIRTS FLEX)
[1](#)E. 08 CHIANG MAI 178 (PRO AND ANTI-THAKSIN)
[1](#)F. 08 CHIANG MAI 168 (POLITICAL TEMPERATURE)

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Sensitive but unclassified; please handle accordingly.

Summary and Comment

[1](#)1. (SBU) Despite reports from multiple sources of a decline in their support base, pro-Thaksin "redshirt" groups in northern Thailand continue to intimidate officials and supporters of the present government, even when they travel to northern Thailand on personal business. In the latest spate of incidents, the targets were a Deputy Prime Minister, the Deputy Finance Minister, and a Peoples Alliance for Democracy (PAD) leader. Separately, we understand that the police are scrutinizing redshirt activities here more closely and considering pressing charges in some cases, and that the Government may attempt to close the main pro-Thaksin community radio station in Chiang Mai.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Comment: Legal action against the Rak Chiang Mai 51 (Love Chiang Mai 51 -- RCM51) group and other redshirt protestors appears warranted in some cases due to their use of violence. However, such action would raise concern over double-standards given the Thai Government's reluctance so far to prosecute PAD leaders and members over their seizure of Government House and Bangkok's two airports in 2008. Failure on the part of the government and law enforcement to treat both sides equally would only inflame political tensions that are already high, and could result in increased sympathy for the redshirts if the general public believes they are being unfairly targeted. End Summary and Comment.

Redshirts on the Hunt

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[1](#)3. (U) In three recent incidents, redshirt groups have made it clear they will continue to intimidate officials and supporters of the Royal Thai Government during their travels to northern Thailand, even if their trips are not of an official nature. On January 24, members of the pro-Thaksin RCM51 group interrupted a gathering of Chiang Mai University alumni at which Deputy Prime Minister Suthep Thaugsuban was present. In order to prevent them from entirely spoiling the festivities, Suthep departed the venue and returned almost immediately to Bangkok, according to journalists covering the story. Nonetheless, one Chiang Mai University faculty member attending the event was hit in the

face with a hard object her colleagues believe was a shoe by a redshirted, masked assailant.

14. (U) Separately, on January 21, RCM51 members surrounded a Chiang Mai temple at which Deputy Finance Minister Pradit Pataraprasit was participating in a merit-making ceremony. Accounts differ as to the particulars of the incident, with The Nation newspaper reporting that police had to rescue the Minister, while our contacts told us that police did not have to take action because he had departed the scene before the RCM51 members arrived. The Nation also reported that the RCM51 members were armed with bags of a blood-like substance and that they held a ceremony outside the temple cursing the Minister, but we were unable to verify this information. (Note: RCM51 has previously used pig's blood against government officials, per Ref D.)

15. (U) On January 23, RCM51 sent supporters to a Buddhist meditation center where PAD leader Chamlong Srimuang was reported to be. They entered the complex searching for him, demolished some of the rickety shacks, and set others ablaze. As it turned out, Chamlong did not even travel to Chiang Mai. Journalists covering the story allege that RCM51 knew Chamlong would not be present, but wanted an excuse to attack the center, which they view as pro-PAD.

Protection and Support for Redshirts Waning?

16. (SBU) RCM51 and other redshirt groups have long benefited from police indifference toward their activities (Ref E), but that may be about to change. Not only have rumors begun circulating about the search for a replacement for the current Region 5 Police Commander, who is a classmate of Thaksin's, but

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also Deputy Prime Minister Suthep has made public comments about the need for a shake-up in the police force. A reporter also told us he expected an announcement soon about the imminent change. Separately, the Chiang Mai Vice Governor in charge of security affairs told us that the police have been instructed to wrap up investigation of the cases involving violence by the redshirts, paving the way for legal action against them.

17. (SBU) Incidents under investigation include the murder of the father of Chiang Mai's pro-PAD community radio station operator last December, and the assault against two Constitutional Court officials at Chiang Mai airport last November. The Vice Governor told us he believes that charges in these and other pending cases will send a message to RCM51 that it is no longer above the law, and may deter it from future violent actions. Furthermore, according to a member of the press, RCM51 leaders were summoned to Provincial Police headquarters on January 28 and cautioned against future transgressions.

18. (SBU) Separately, a senior police contact told us that hard-core members of RCM51 now number 50-60, though the group can still mobilize 200-300 supporters via its community radio station. Another contact pointed to signs that the redshirts' support base is on the decline: he claims that their funding sources are drying up and they are unable to gain the support of MPs in the pro-Thaksin Puea Thai opposition party. In addition, some key voices at Chiang Mai University who were previously sympathetic to the redshirts cause or who stayed out of the political fray, have begun calling for a stop to the redshirts' aggression and for impartial law enforcement.

Woe on the Radio?

19. (SBU) In another development, a Minister in the Prime

Minister's office recently spoke of the need to close five community radio stations in Thailand, including two in Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces, for being used as political tools and instigating unrest. The only station cited by name in the press report was the Taxi Lovers Club station in Bangkok, which is pro-Thaksin. Citing credible sources, a reporter with whom we spoke said that the pro-Thaksin station in Chiang Mai was another station that would be closed. The Minister in question nonetheless reportedly said, "There will not be discrimination against rivals." The same reporter told us that some DJs had left the pro-Thaksin station in question to establish their own stations. RCM51 leader and oQator of Chiang Mai's main pro-Thaksin station confirmed that many of his emplQees had left because he was not able to pay them a regular salary since his station was commercial free and therefore did not earn advertising revenue.

110. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
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